

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

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FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 088

INFO AMEMBASSY ALGIERS

AMEMBASSY AMMAN

AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

AMEMBASSY CAIRO

AMEMBASSY JIDDA

AMEMBASSY KUWAIT

AMEMBASSY LONDO

AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI

AMEMBASSY MOSCOW

S E C R E T DAMASCUS 7077

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, SY, LE, XF

SUBJECT: WHY ASAD WENT TO RIYADH

1. SUMMARY: SYRIA HAS BEEN SUBJECTED TO MOUNTING ARAB PRESSURE AS RESULT OF ITS LATEST MILITARY ACTIONS IN LEBANON. BOYCOTT BY KEY ARAB STATES OF ARAB GAMES IN DAMASCU, CRITICAL STATEMENT OF TRIPOLI WORKERS CONFERENCE, AND MESSAGES FROM ALGERIAN AND MOROCCAN LEADERS HAVE PRORVIDED ASAD WITH FRESH VARIETY OF SIGNALS ON ARAB WORLD VIEWS REGARDING HIS POLICY IN LEBANON. SEMIRAMIS OPERATIONS, ATTACKS ON SYRIAN EMBASSIES, AND ATTEMPTED ASSASSINATIONS SENIOR BAATHIST OFFICIALS HAVE ALSO ADDED TO STRAINS HERE. IT WAS PROBABLY CUMULATIVE EFFECT OF THESE PRESSURES TOGETHER WITH GROWING ECONOMIC DIFFICULTIES

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FACING HIS COUNTRY AND NEED TO SHOW RESPECT FOR SAUDIS THAT

LED ASAD TO ACCEPT SIX-PARTY SUMMIT IN RIYADH, DROPPING HIS PREVIOUS INSISTENCE ON HUSSEIN'S ATTENDANCE. LEFT TO HIS OWN DEVICES ASAD WOULD PROBABLY HAVE PREFERRED NO MEETING. HOWEVER, ASAD WISHES TO AVOID ISOLATION IN ARAB WORLD AND TO HEAD OFF ACTIONS WHICH WOULD UNDERMINE SYRIA'S ABILITY TO CONTINUE ITS MILITARY OFFENSIVE. TO DO SO HE MUST DEMONSTRATE HE HAS DONE BEST WITH IMPOSSIBLE SITUATION CREATED BY PALESTINIANS AND LEBANESE LEFTISTS AND HELP SADAT FIND WAY TO SAVE FACE. END SUMMARY

2. PRESSURES ON SYRIAN REGIME RESULTING FROM ITS LATEST MILITARY ACTIONS IN LEBANON APPEAR TO HAVE REACHED PEAK NOT SEEN SINCE LAST JUNE. AS LATE AS SEPTEMBER, SYRIA COULD ARGUE THAT PALESTINIAN INTRANSIGENCE NECESSITATED THE METN OPERATION. IN THE LATEST BATTLES, HOWEVER, IT WAS SYRIA WHICH REJECTED A PALESTINIAN PROPOSAL AND PREEMPTED THE QUADRIPARTITE TALKS IN CHTAURA BY LAUNCHING NEW MILITARY OFFENSIVE.

3. A RECENT INDICATOR OF ARAB DISSATISFACTION WITH SYRIAN POLICY IN LEBANON WAS ABSENCE OF ALGERIA, EGYPT, IRAQ AND LIBYA FROM ARAB GAMES IN DAMASCUS. (TUNISIAN AND SOMALI ABSENCE BOTH BEING EXPLAINED BY THEIR AMBASSADORS HERE AS HAVING NO PLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE.) SECOND INDICATOR WAS TENOR OF RECOMMENDATIONS INCLUDING FINANCIAL SANCTIONS AGAINST SYRIA PROPOSED BY RECENT ARAB WORKERS' CONFERENCE IN TRIPOLI TO REVERSE SYRIAN INTERVENTION IN LEBANON. AS REPORTED DAMASCUS 6928, PRESIDENT ASAD REFUSED TO MEET WITH COMMITTEE FORMED TO BRING VIEWS OF CONFEREES TO ASAD'S PERSONAL ATTENTION. LIBYA SHORTLY THEREAFTER WITHDREW ITS AMBASSADOR FROM DAMASCUS.

4. ALGERIAN AND MOROCCAN LEADERS HAVE EACH RECENTLY DISPATCHED ENVOYS TO CONVEY TO PRESIDENT ASAD THEIR VIEWS ON HIS APPROACH TO RESOLVING LEBANESE CRISIS. IT WOULD THUS APPEAR THAT NORTH AFRICAN STATES HAVE, IN THEIR VARIOUS MANNERS, MADE KNOWN TO DAMASCUS THEIR POSITIONS REGARDING SYRIAN POLICY IN LEBANON. ALGERIANS APPARENTLY SECRET

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REITERATED THEIR RESERVATIONS ABOUT SYRIAN INTERVENTION, WHILE DAMASCUS MEDIA HAVE REFERRED TO MOROCCAN ADVICE THAT SYRIA ATTEND SUMMIT.

5. SECURITY THREATS CONSTITUTE ADDITIONAL PRESSURE ON REGIME. SEMIRAMIS HOTEL OPERATION AND ATTACKS UPON SYRIAN EMBASSIES IN ROME AND ISLAMABAD DRAMATICALLY BROUGHT HOME TO SARG CAPABILITY OF PALESTINIANS AND IRAQIS TO EMBARRASS

REGIME. ATTEMPTED ASSASSINATIONS OF THREE SENIOR BAATH PARTY FIGURES IN RECENT DAYS, PLUS REPORTED EXECUTION OF TWO PALESTINIANS CAPTURED WHILE PREPARING TO LAUNCH ROCKETS AGAINST PRESIDENT'S HOME IN DAMASCUS HAVE BEEN FURTHER WARNING SIGNALS.

6. IT PROBABLY THE CUMULATIVE INFLUENCE OF THESE PRESSURES, PLUS THE GROWING NECESSITY FOR RESTORATION OF SAUDI FINANCIAL AID THAT LED ASAD TO ACCEPT THE SIX-PARTY SUMMIT IN RIYADH. IN DOING SO HE HAS DROPPED HIS PREVIOUS INSISTENCE ON HUSSEIN'S ATTENDANCE, HIMSELF PAYING A CALL ON HUSSEIN EN ROUTE TO RIYADH.

7. ASAD IN RIYADH WILL BE ARGUING THAT THE PALESTINIAN INVOLVEMENT IN LEBANESE AFFAIRS AND PLO REFUSAL TO RESPECT TERMS OF ACIRO ACCORD--INCLUDING WITHDRAWAL TO CAMPS-- HAVE IMPEDED LEBANESE SETTLEMENT. AT SAME TIME HE CAN BE EXPECTED TO SHOW SOME FLEXIBILITY, AS SYRIA DID LAST JUNE, WITH REGARD TO ROLE IN ARAB LEAGUE MEDIATOR AND WILL LIKELY APPROVE INCREASED AL FORCES IN LEBANON.

8. SYRIA'S PRINCIPAL GOALS WILL BE TO AVOID ISOLATION IN ARAB WORLD AND TO HEAD OFF ANY PROPOSAL WHICH WOULD CONTINUE IMPOSITION OF FINANCIAL SANCTIONS ON SYRIA OR UNDERMINE ITS ABILITY TO BRING LEBANESE CRISIS TO "SUCCESSFUL"--ON SYRIAN TERMS--CONCLUSION. SYRIAN MILITARY OFFENSIVE HAS GENERATED MOMENTUM ASAD LOATH TO REIN IN: WE DO NOT SEE HIM AGREEING TO AN EARLY WITHDRAWAL OF HIS TROOPS. HE HAS PROMISED THEM THEY WOULD BE OUT OF THE LEBANESE MOUNTAINS BY WINTER. BY THIS HE MEANT THEY WOULD BE ON THE LEBANESE COAST NOT BACK IN DAMASCUS. EVEN SAUDIS, SYRIAN MINECONOMY IMADI TELLS US, SYMPATHIZE WITH ASAD'S GOALS AND HAVE URGED HIM TO FINISH PALESTINIANS
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OF QUICKLY. SAUDIS HAVE PROVIDED ASAD WITH SETTING AT RIYADH FOR SYRIAN LEADER TO PROPOSE NEEDED FACESAVING FORMULAS FOR ARAFAT AND SADAT. WE HAVE NO GROUNDS TO SPECULATE WHAT ARAFAT WILL REQUIRE. EARLY REPORTS FROM RIYADH SUGGEST THAT A BEGINNING HAS BEEN MADE ON THE FIRST ESSENTIAL, A SADAT-ASAD RECONCILIATION, WHICH MAY HAVE INVOLVED SYRIAN ACCEPTANCES OF THE EGYPTIAN "PLAN" TO RESTORE PEACE TO LEBANON. AS WE READ THIS "PLAN," IT CAN ALLOW FOR CONTINUED SYRIAN MILITARY ADVANCES.
MURPHY

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